

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Seventeen

Tall Maxine Vail Has Dreams

IN BUCKNER, ILLINOIS, teeth braces are strictly for the girls whose fathers own the mines. If it was your father who carried his lunch pail on the 7:00 A.M. shift, you could be sure your teeth would stay the way they came in. Mine came in "buck," and I found out the only remedy for buckteeth when you haven't the cash to pay for braces, is to keep your mouth shut. This may be fine for the teeth, but it's withering for the personality.

In those days, stories of six-foot-tall glamour queens hadn't seeped into Buckner. It wouldn't have helped if they had. I wasn't six-foot; just tall enough and a gawky girl. At school dances, the dwarfed fellows always were stuck with me for a partner, and we lurched and bobbed across the floor together. But I worked out a dandy cure for my height; I curved my shoulders into a mound and developed a walk that was a cross between a glide and a hunch.

The nice ladies on our street said over their teacups, "Pity about poor Maxine, isn't it? Her brother's so good looking and poor Maxine. So tall and awkward, and oh, those protruding front teeth! Couldn't something be done about them?"

But it wasn't as if the fellows didn't ask me for dates.

Not at all; one did. He asked me to go to church and Mom said No.

"Look, Mom," I pleaded, "if you want me to be friendly, like you're always talking about, you'd better let me go to church next week with Bob and his girl and - Bud."

"No." Mom couldn't be persuaded. "You're too young. You absolutely cannot have a date with that boy."

"But, Mom, all the other girls can go to church with a boy, and my own brother, Bob, will go with me. Mom, Bud is the only fellow who ever asked me for a date. Please, please, let me go."

Mom still said No. "Absolutely no."

"O.K.," I told her. "Right here and now, I swear I will never go inside a church again as long as I live. Never, never, never."

For a thirteen-year-old girl, that was dramatic. But I meant it, and I kept my word, too, for a long time.

About four years, later, we moved to Chicago. I still had chipmunk teeth and fancy dreams. Maybe business school and then a job out in the world, where surely I would meet a man who would love a girl for what she is, not for what she appears to be. My dreams must have stuck out as my teeth did, because one of the business school teachers fixed me up with a blind date.

My date's name was Ray Vail. I remember very well the first time that we went together to a Chicago dance hall and Ray Vail held me close. The band was playing "Dancing Cheek to Cheek." There was a cloud of my dreams swirling around us when out of the cloud I heard, "Why, you're tall enough so we can dance cheek to cheek. I don't think I ever danced with anybody as tall as you are."

I tripped over one of my dreams then and stepped solidly on his toe. "Excuse me," he said in my ear. "Say, let's start home early and talk about when we can get together next."

About that time I think it was that I began idling in front of furniture-store window displays on my way home from business school. How many girls have been guilty of such loitering?

Maybe the story books weren't wrong. We were married. From the start, the marriage went "sour." I couldn't transform Ray into a home-loving man no matter what I did. Most likely it was my face he objected to spend his evenings with. Even when I told him he was going to be a family man, he reached for his hat.

"Baby, huh?" he said. He twirled the hat around on one finger. He buttoned his coat and tucked his red-and-black striped scarf around his neck. "Well, I sure hope it don't yell its head off. The place is too small for a man to relax with a baby yelling at the top of its lungs."

I watched him go. "There goes my good-looking, smooth-dancing husband," I thought. "The one that married a horse named Maxine." I wanted to jerk his hat down good and tight.

The rest sounds like those confession stories where the heroine gets a bad deal. It was all bad - the time in the hospital, the way that Ray looked at baby Sylvia when I brought her home, the nights he threatened to sleep in the park because she cried too loud.

Sure she cried. She heard nothing but loud talk and bickering from her dad and mom; raising her voice came natural.

One night, when she was about three, she screamed louder than ever.

"There, darling, try to sleep now. Mother'll put you back in your bed."

She stiffened. "No, no, hold me, Mommie, hold me." Ray woke up. "Aw, for the love of Pete, Maxine, can't you do something with her? I work all day; she's your job. For my money, I'd like to fire you."

There he sat on the edge of the bed with his hair twisted and ruffled, lighting a cigarette. I finally made up my mind and pulled on my bathrobe.

"You just got what you asked for, Brother. I'm leaving," I said.

The only suitcase we owned was under the bed. I scraped it across the floor, folded up my two wool dresses and laid Sylvia's clothes on top of them and sat on the cover. Ray watched me. He rubbed out his cigarette and lit another. With his thumb nail, he flipped the match toward the ash tray.

"What am I supposed to do with all this furniture and junk?" he asked. As if I cared. I wanted to get away, the quicker the better.

For the next two years, Sylvia and I lived in a furnished room, with light housekeeping privileges. The bed had a faded chintz spread, and the easy chair served us well. In a closet was a hot plate and an icebox. It's amazing what you can do without!

Now I wasn't just poor Maxine who never had any dates; I was Maxine Vail who hadn't held her husband, whose marriage had failed. You know, Maxine Vail with the dreams of love and a home.

I got a job days and dragged Sylvia over to Mother's while I was working. Nights I brought her back to the room with me. It was a merry-go-around of work and cooking on a hot plate and washing clothes at midnight, hanging them up to dry on a string stretched across our only room.

Sylvia was growing up to be a nervous, confused little youngster; and the night the notice came that my divorce had gone through uncontested, I was much too tired to cry.

I jumped from job to job - a factory, a massage parlor on Sixty-third Street, operator of a freight elevator. The freight elevator was as low as I could get, I thought.

"Why shouldn't I complain?" I crabbed to my mother.

"I don't know what I ever did to deserve a life like this. You know what I'm doing now? I'm on that elevator and I'm hauling the freight off and on it, myself. I tell you I'm quitting, I'm going to find something else."

I found something else, all right. Piece work at the canned soup plant, where I was a carrot scraper - fifteen minutes to the bushel basket!

I thought the job would suit me fine. You didn't need beauty to be a carrot scraper. You didn't

need brains. You sat at a long table with fifty women and scraped carrots.

Every fifteen minutes I got another basket of carrots shoved at me. I had to scrape all of them, toss them in the bin and be ready for the next basket in fifteen minutes flat.

But my hands got tangled up. All around me streaks of orange whizzed through the air. The other women could do it; what was wrong with Maxine Vail?

Pick one up, scrape, scrape. I hitched up my shoulders into more of a mound, and with a vengeance in my soul I tried harder. Pick it up, scrape, scrape, toss it in the bin, pick another, faster, faster.

"Hey, girl, take it easy."

A small redhead crowded in beside me on the bench.

It was Gladys Anderson from across the room.

"Don't be funny," I said. This was none of her business. Pick up the carrots, scrape, scrape.

She wasn't trying to be funny, she said. She'd been watching me from across the room, thought if I didn't stop trying so hard I'd crack up. "Move over a couple of inches. I'm through with mine and we've still got almost six minutes left to finish yours."

But the sight of her helping me was painful. "How do you think it makes me feel to have a little thing like you helping a big cow like me?"

What she said then puzzled me. It was something about GOD making me tall. All the time she was scraping the carrots, she talked.

"If you ever want to talk anything out, no matter what, you can come around to me," she said.

"Thanks," I told her. "There's nothing wrong with me that one decent break wouldn't fix."

"You feel pretty sorry for yourself, don't you?" Her hands were skimming down the sides of the carrots.

"I'm bored with the whole mess," I told her. "I think I'll have a big stiff drink after work."

Then she flung more words at me, about not needing a drink if you're a Christian.

Right then, the foreman jumped us. "All right, all right, get with it, Maxine. You're one of the slowest girls in the place. Get a few more of those carrots out of that basket or you'll get out."

That did it. I threw down my scraper and I stood up and I yelled, "No big lug like you is going to tell me what to do. I'd like to see you scrape just a dozen of your filthy carrots. I'm going to scrape the things out of my hair and get out of here right now. And as far as I'm concerned, brother, you know where to go."

I didn't look at Gladys or at the foreman. I stamped out.

I got as far as the time clock when I started to cry. But Gladys had left the carrots and followed me out. She gave it to me straight, told me I was my own worst enemy. I knew that. But I didn't get it when she said I could die, be born again, and begin to live in CHRIST.

Sounded like religion and I hadn't been in church since back in Buckner where those nice ladies said over their teacups, "Poor Maxine."

"Maxine, you're so tired trying to do it all. You're so 'heavy-laden' you're weighed down with enough self-pity to sink a battleship. But listen, friend, I've good news for you if you're sure you're at the end of your rope."

I leaned on the time clock and kept listening. "You're tired, right?" she asked.

"I don't think I'll ever get rested."

"But you can, friend. Listen, CHRIST said, 'Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.'

"Gladys, this had better all be true. Look me straight in the eye. You had better know this is all the truth. I'm at the end of my rope."

Then I said Yes, I'd go to church with her that night.

It wasn't really a church. It was a mission, the Pacific Garden Mission.

After the sermon, I wanted to go up front for prayer.

But I couldn't walk down the aisle. "Horsey" Maxine walk down in front of all those people, all those men? The piano was sending forth a sweet song I remembered from childhood. Gladys was beside me. In the prayer room, she kept whispering, "For GOD so loved Maxine that He gave His only begotten Son that if Maxine believes in Him, she should not perish but have everlasting life."

That was ten years ago. I'm still no beauty, but I can laugh now because I found the only relaxed way to live. I'm resting in JESUS, my Saviour.

Sylvia, my daughter, is no longer a nervous girl; she's a healthy, normal teen-ager.

I'm still supporting her, and we still live a simple life.

Pity myself? No, why should I? I have everlasting life and belong to the Son of GOD.

~ end of chapter 17 ~